



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# News Release

Office of Public Affairs  
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
June 30, 1998

Tipper Gore, wife of the Vice President, and Michael Naranjo, a nationally recognized blind sculptor, will join Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr., on July 14, for the Washington, D.C., observance of the 50th anniversary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Blind Rehabilitation Program -- the nation's largest single program of care and training for blind Americans.

Naranjo, blinded by a grenade explosion while serving with the U.S. Army in Vietnam, will participate in a special ceremony at VA headquarters with Mrs. Gore, Secretary West, veterans service organization officials, and leaders in blind rehabilitation to recognize a program that has helped thousands of blinded veterans achieve independent and productive lives.

Naranjo will represent the more than 23,000 veterans who have completed the VA blind rehabilitation center training program during the past half-century. The Santa Fe, N.M., resident is a member of the Santa Clara Pueblo Tribe. He began his sculpting career after completing the VA blind rehabilitation program and his work is represented in several museum collections as well as those in the White House and the Vatican.

An exhibit of Naranjo's work will be displayed at VA headquarters during his visit. Naranjo also will conduct art workshops for disabled veterans and children at VA medical centers in Washington and Baltimore.

VA operates nine blind rehabilitation centers in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. When the first was opened July 4, 1948, at the Edward Hines, Jr., VA Medical Center near Chicago, it had only nine beds. Today, the centers have a total of 228 beds and more than 300 employees. More than 1,600 blinded veterans attended the centers in 1997.

In addition to its residential program, VA has outpatient specialists at 15 sites who assess blind veterans' needs before and after they train at the blind rehabilitation centers. They work with as many as 900 veterans a year. More than 100 Visual Impairment Services Teams coordinate the health care of blind veterans at VA medical centers, assess their benefits and other needs, and provide referrals to the rehabilitation centers.

Rehabilitation center participants take courses in:

- Orientation and mobility
- Communications
- Activities of daily living, including independent living
- Manual skills
- Physical conditioning
- Recreational participation
- Computer access training

In nearly 20 years, VA's blind rehabilitation centers have provided master's degree-level training to more than 1,100 rehabilitation specialists.